[Part II]

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Part II

Humanity has had free run on Earth for years, now, and Gabriel is accustomed to their presence now. He is accustomed to bowing his head to those he brings messages to, and he is accustomed to their imperfections.

He considers himself fortunate that he is not called to Earth often, however, and in his quieter moments he thinks he understands why Lucifer drew the line at bowing to humanity with its imperfections.

Gabriel spends his time managing the new organization of Heaven, with the creation of angels arrayed in garrisons and the patrols to keep Fallen angels from important human bloodlines, and he spends most of his free moments training with his sword, giving himself over to the mindlessness of the physical activity.

It helps him forget his urges to touch another angel like Lucifer once touched him, and it helps him keep from thinking too much about the changes in Heaven. (Angels have been created to replace those who Fell and those who were slain, angels who have never seen Lucifer or God, and Gabriel is sometimes afraid of them.)

"Gabriel?" It is Dobiel in the doorway, interrupting his latest sparring match, and Gabriel spins with his sword at the ready before lowering it.

"What is it?" Gabriel snaps, sheathing his sword. "I wasn't to be bothered, remember?"

"Michael has asked to see you, brother." Dobiel is a serious looking angel, with dark hair and a tendency to obey Gabriel's orders to the letter, and Gabriel has learned to be careful with what he tells him. (He often feels that he has to be careful around all angels, as he knows that he is different from the majority of angels in Heaven.)

"Michael?" Gabriel asks, immediately losing the irritation. "Lead the way, then," he says, and Dobiel bows his head as he leads Gabriel to Michael.

Dobiel leaves the moment Michael turns to face them, and Gabriel is silently thankful for angels who can take hints. The conversations he'll sometimes have with Michael just aren't for angels who haven't been there since the beginning. (And Dobiel, unlike Uriel, has never attempted to show any emotion, any hint of a personality despite Gabriel's attempts to draw it out of him.)

Michael seals the doorway that Dobiel left with a gesture, and turns back to look out of the window. They are in one of the taller buildings in Heaven, and Gabriel decided long ago to never take the view for granted - Heaven was beautiful, and although he couldn't know what the future held, he wanted to savor this sight in case he was ever unable to view it. So Gabriel joins Michael at the window and leans on the window-sill, looking out at the sky.

"You called me here for a reason, Michael," He says after a moment, and looks at Michael as he speaks. Michael is still as bright and glorious as he was in the beginning, although he has grown - matured, perhaps - since then, and there is a wariness in his eyes that Gabriel has grown used to. (He has never liked it, however. He can't look at Raphael's eyes for long, either, as there is an omni-present rage hovering there.)

(Gabriel avoids mirrors and other reflective surfaces, as he doubts that he will ever like what he finds in his own eyes.)

Michael sighs and turns to face Gabriel, all business as always, and Gabriel straightens up from the window-sill.

"Well?"

"You are familiar with the Grigori, correct?" Michael asks, and it's less of a question and more of an introduction to the subject. Of course Gabriel knows about the Grigori, of course he remembers spreading the order that the two hundred angels of their class were to descend upon Earth and keep a close eye on what humanity was doing. Of course he remembers their questioning stares at their orders, for they weren't to return to Heaven until humanity was gone, and humanity wouldn't be wiped from the Earth for a long, long time.

He remembers condemning Shemyazaz and Arakiel and Remial and all of them to a long vigil as he delivered the orders from God.

(There is little glory in being the messenger, Gabriel has found. He can't always bring good tidings, and often he delivers news or orders that few angels want to hear or obey. But they always listen, and they always obey, and someday Gabriel thinks that an angel somewhere will be pushed too far and strike back at him, even if he is only a messenger.)

"Yes, I'm familiar with them," Gabriel says at last. "What about them?"

"The Metatron has informed me that they have wilfully neglected their duty and have engaged in carnal relations with humans." Michael's expression is

impassive, and Gabriel resists the sudden urge to throttle him. "They have created children, Gabriel, and this can not stand."

Gabriel doesn't let his rising fury show, and instead asks with a learned calm: "What are you going to have us do?"

"Father has ordered that we bind the Grigori and seal them away. We are allowed to use force, if necessary." And Gabriel knows that it will be necessary, and he dreads what he knows is coming.

"And their children?" He doesn't want to ask this, he doesn't want to know, he already knows that it won't be pleasant - angels weren't meant to create more of their kind, not without express permission from God, let alone create offspring with humans.

When Michael turns away and looks out the window again, Gabriel knows that whatever he dreads, it will be worse than that.

"They are all to be slain, even those that are unborn," Michael says without any expressed emotion, and Gabriel has to clench his hands into fists. But there is more. "You are to be responsible for this task, Gabriel."

There is a moment of silence as it sinks in, as Gabriel realizes that it is so much worse than he thought.

His first thought is to refuse. His first reaction is to open his mouth and tell Michael that no, he'd die first, he would not kill children for Heaven, for God, for the sake of whatever reason God has for this.

His second thought is simply an image, a flash of memory: Lucifer's face as he realized his defeat, as he realized that he was not to be killed.

The silence stretches, and Gabriel closes his eyes. He can't hide his reluctance from Michael, he knows that, but Michael has always known that Gabriel never followed orders blindly. He thinks about them, weighs his options, and always obeys.

The thought that ends any thought of fleeing, of evading this order is this: if he does not do this duty, another angel will be made to kill children in his stead, and Gabriel cannot live with that burden also on him.

He bows his head. He doesn't look at Michael.

"When do I leave?"

"We have two days to prepare. I suggest you prepare for fighting, Gabriel. The Grigori will not go quietly."

Gabriel buries his emotions, realizing that Michael has done the same out of necessity, and he wonders at why he has to kill so many of his family. When he

looks at Michael again his face is a blank mask.

"You may go," Michael says, unnecessarily, and Gabriel turns and leaves as fast as he can.

Michael, to his credit, is not as heartless as he pretends to be. He spent a long time alone on his return from the trip to Hell, and he adapted as quickly as he could to stifling his emotions so that he would not harm the Host with the ever-present grief he now nurtured, and the regret...

He was angry at himself for feeling regret the first time he felt it, he is still angry at how much he regrets not holding Lucifer closer, not preventing him from leaving that night before the battle.

He regrets not learning what kind of corruption Lucifer spread that changed Gabriel and sparked an ever-present rage in Raphael.

He regrets not pushing Lucifer down to the floor and making him tell them all everything that time so long ago when Lucifer first withheld the truth from them after God changed him.

He regrets so, so much and he cannot show any of it, he cannot show the grief, and he reminds himself that he is the most visible leader of the angelic Host, of Heaven, and he cannot have room in himself for traitorous thoughts. Not when he was the good son, the good child of God who never once let himself become corrupted, and who defeated the corrupter.

He reminds himself of this, he brings up the anger in his thoughts and he exalts the righteous fury of knowing that he did the right thing and he should not be sad for doing so.

So he does not show Gabriel that he too dislikes his role, and that he too dislikes the idea of slaying children that weren't supposed to be created in the first place.

He does not envy Gabriel his task.

Uriel wears two swords at his hips at all times, now, and Gabriel has continued to spar with him, to practice the fine control over fire that he lacks.

They parry and stab and advance and retreat as Gabriel throws himself into the exercises with Uriel, flames flickering closely to the edges of his own blade as he shows Uriel a new level of control.

Uriel asks him about it, after the practice.

"I figured out how to be calmer," Gabriel says. "And it was easier." He pauses and

looks at Uriel, running fingers along his blade. "That and I'm treating it like water. Not that it is water, of course."

"I don't understand," Uriel says, which he has been told to say when he doesn't understand, instead of giving Gabriel a look of confusion and remaining quiet.

"It's an elemental thing, Uriel. You have a talent for fire, as I'm sure you know." At Uriel's nod Gabriel goes on. "I have a talent for water. I figured out how to apply the talent to my sword the other night, and, well, it's been easier."

(He figured out that he had an affinity for water ages ago, barely days after his creation. He remembers the simple joy he felt in playing with it, guiding its pathways and in less serious moments, splashing the others with it. But that's all in the past, now.)

"And it has improved your control over your weapon?"

"Yes. You've seen it, I've got the fire under control now." Gabriel smiles, pleased with this small accomplishment, and he demonstrates his new control with a smooth movement that leads to Uriel reflexively blocking the blow and retreating.

Gabriel laughs, and doesn't follow up the attack. Instead he lowers his sword again and sits on the bench at the side of the room. "Join me?"

Uriel does, sheathing his swords. From the way that he is newly tense, Gabriel can tell that he wants to ask Gabriel something, perhaps confirm a rumor or a thought, and he is unsure if Gabriel will welcome the question. It's a relatively common look these days, and so far Gabriel has never regretted letting (or making) Uriel ask.

He sits and puts his hands on his knees, prompting Gabriel to nudge his shoulder.

"What is it?" Gabriel asks.

"I have been requested to form garrisons, Gabriel." Uriel says, still tense. "And perhaps to lead one. Abdiel is...insistent about this project of his."

Abdiel, one of the seraphim: Gabriel remembers him. Abdiel is similar to Dobiel if not more strong-willed, and he tends to be rather strict about orders and the hierarchy. He likes organization and management, and so Gabriel is not surprised that he is organizing such a thing.

"Let me guess: he asked you because you talk to me on a regular basis." Gabriel says, and at Uriel nod he sighs. "Right, well, I expected as much. Now, I'd like to tell him no outright, but let's hear what the idea would entail first."

Uriel looks at Gabriel and removes his hands from his knees, placing them on the bench. He looks younger for a moment, and Gabriel can't help but want to make things easier on him.

"He wants to create seven garrisons, each composed of seven angels of varying ranks, and they would in essence be fast-moving units that you could send into any combat situation or on any mission and they would complete it as quickly and efficiently as they could. He wants them to be useful to you, Gabriel." Uriel finishes his little speech by standing, hands going behind his back as he looks away from Gabriel.

Gabriel hms, thinking about the proposal seriously. It's a surprisingly valid and useful suggestion from Abdiel, and he knows that the seraphim would manage such a project well - even if he can be a bit annoying and overly managing, this would still be a proper fit for the angel.

"I like it," Gabriel says at length. "It's a good idea." He stands as well, stretching. "So tell Abdiel that you'll help him pick members, and you'll be the go-between for your garrison and me. Keep me up to date on who you pick, and which garrison you join, okay?"

Uriel nods, and begins to walk out. Gabriel watches him go and hopes that whatever comes out of this garrison plan works.

Gabriel has no more time for garrisons or sparring after that, as he has a duty to prepare for, and he cannot leave Dobiel to organize his forces for him. Not for this. Dobiel is efficient, and organizes well, but the Grigori demand a more personal touch, as they are family.

Distant family who will be punished, but family nonetheless.

He learns from messages brought to him that Raphael has been ordered to bind and seal one of the Grigori specifically, for Azazel had brought the knowledge of weapons and armor to the humans, and so would cause a great deal of suffering for it.

He learns from those messages that Michael is responsible for binding the rest of them, and that may be the most difficult task to accomplish, as they will not go quietly. Not after they learn of Gabriel's task.

He learns from those messages that Uriel, his Uriel has been selected to bring warnings to one of the humans, so that he may escape the coming destruction.

He learns that his Father plans to wipe the Earth clean of all humans (save a very few) in one great act, and when he learns of that news he wants to go directly to the Metatron and rail against his orders. For there will be no need for him to destroy the Nephilim, not if they will die regardless.

But he restrains himself. He does not go to the Metatron, and he continues his preparations for war. He adjusts his forces accordingly when he learns that Uriel won't join him in battle, and to protect himself from his thoughts he throws himself into his work. Dobiel doesn't even have to remind him gently of tasks that

he has yet to do, for he has done them.

An aside on the Metatron, and on its sudden appearance: after Lucifer was cast out of Heaven, and when God created the last of His angels, the Metatron was the last He created.

It is the only angel beyond the original four archangels to have been in God's presence and survived, but not due to its personal power. No, it was created specifically to be God's Voice, to convey His Word to the Host.

Gabriel has seen the Metatron's eyes, and they are empty. It stands before God's empty throne at all times, and if questioned it will answer with God's voice.

(Raphael, after he met the Metatron for the first time, came and spoke to Gabriel in one of their rare moments of camaraderie.

"Does this mean that Father will no longer show himself to us?" He had asked, and Gabriel had no answer for him.

"I don't think He cares about us like He did a while ago, Raphael. He has humans now to think about."

Raphael had bowed his head then and moved closer to Gabriel, inviting a small touch of Gabriel's hand on his shoulder.

"I do not know what I will do if He does abandon us once and for all, Gabriel." Raphael confessed, quietly. "I do not think that I will do anything that you would approve of."

"I would understand why, Raphael," Gabriel had said then, and they had lapsed into silence for a while before Raphael left.)

Gabriel has not seen if Michael has any opinion about the Metatron. Michael shares nothing with him, and little with Raphael, and all Gabriel knows about Michael now is that he strives to be the ideal leader of the Host.

Gabriel has not asked the Metatron many questions, and he doesn't plan to ask it any in the future. Not without some obvious need.

They are assembled at the gates of Heaven, and they are vast in number. Michael has not skimped on assembling his forces, and Gabriel finds himself dreading the reason why. It's easier to dread the fighting, he thinks, instead of dreading his orders.

The gates open slowly, tall as they are, but silently, and the Host waits patiently as they do. As soon as the gates are completely open the angels take to wing,

and there is the sound of mighty wings as over a thousand angels leave Heaven and descend to Earth.

This is not the first time Gabriel has been on Earth and this is not the first time he has experienced the glory of its wild beauty, but every single time Gabriel sees Earth close up he has to pause and drink in the sights, for it is so different from Heaven. Earth isn't perfect, and that makes it interesting and new and it takes effort for Gabriel to keep himself from abandoning the Host to explore the Earth.

But he stays in his place and soon they are over a too-warm region with red-brown soil and few examples of plant life and plenty of hills. Gabriel doesn't know if the place has a name, and he doesn't want to know it if it does. He's planning to do this duty and forget that he did it, as soon as he can.

If he can.

They land, every angel hidden in human shape to prevent the Earth from changing in their presence, and for a moment there is stillness in their ranks. For a moment there is peace as they all look and wait, and then Uriel is ascending and departing, and Raphael is ascending with his forces to find Azazel, and then Gabriel joins Michael in the air as they begin their hunt for the Grigori.

Gabriel has reasoned that finding the first Grigori will give him a good idea of where to begin his own hunt for the Nephilim.

Gabriel has also given his forces specific orders: find the Nephilim, born and unborn, and bring them to me. Do not harm them.

He will not allow any other angel to shoulder this burden, as it is almost too much for him to bear, and he cannot inflict such a guilt upon any of his kin.

Distantly, Gabriel hopes that the Grigori have already fled and hidden themselves so that they will never find them, and distantly he hopes that there will be a way out of this.

But then there is a shout, and Gabriel speaks a name to Michael, identifying the Grigori. "That's Baraqel." He pauses, then speaks again. "I'm leaving, now. I'll send word if I have trouble."

"Go safely, Gabriel," Michael says, and Gabriel is thankful that he has not been wished well for the success of his task.

He leaves Michael's side then, and his forces follow him as they fan out and begin the search.

The first Naphal that Gabriel finds is a young boy, crouched by a well. He is watching a rat sniff at the stones, and he is waiting for his mother to finish drawing water. Gabriel spots him from high above the ground, and he knows with

a cold certainty that the boy is one of his targets, and that the woman near him is not: he can see a faint outline of energy that he has seen on no humans, no demons, and once on very young angels moments after their creation.

Gabriel hardens himself with a final effort and makes it fast and clean: he dives from the sky with his sword drawn, and beheads the boy swiftly, not giving him a chance to notice his approaching death.

Gabriel is flying away, scanning the ground again when he hears the mother scream, and he is forced to close his eyes in pain briefly before resuming his search. The act was easier than he expected, but he never wants to get used to it, and he never wants to hear such a scream again.

The first Naphal that is brought to him is another young boy, dragged screaming through the sky to him, and the two angels bearing the boy up go once Gabriel has taken ahold of the boy's shoulder.

He does not look into the Naphal's eyes as he beheads him and he drops the corpse with a shudder. There are no humans beneath them, there is no one there but Gabriel to hear the loathsome thud of bones and flesh hitting hard ground.

Gabriel creates a fire close to his hand, and burns away the sensation of touching the boy before he continues on.

Gabriel doesn't count how many he kills. He doesn't take pride in the task, he doesn't take pride in the fact that every kill was a clean beheading, and he doesn't speak during the task.

He is deeply unhappy, and for once he is allowed to show it, allowed to show that he dislikes this task, and he sees his emotions echoed in that of his angels, echoed in the faces of angels carrying terrified children to him.

Gabriel wants this to stop. He wants to throw down his sword, to save these children, and he wants to make them all return to Heaven and most of all he wants to scream at the Metatron and demand answers for this.

But he doesn't stop, and as much as he wants to he cannot find the strength in him to disobey and protest this.

He can't help but think of Lucifer, and he can't help but be afraid, and he can't help but fail to rebel, to continue this mad hunt and so he passes Michael during one sweep.

Michael's sword is drawn, and Gabriel doesn't need to ask to know why. He asks a different question, however.

"Did you kill them?"

"I subdued them, Gabriel. They are alive."

Gabriel nods mutely, and thinks that being left alive must be so much worse. He wonders if the Grigori know that their children are being slain as they are captured.

He leaves Michael, then, and it is barely minutes before he discovers that the Grigori do know that their children are being slain.

Remial is stronger than Gabriel expected, and it takes him time to destroy Remial's weapon and then to force him to ground where Michael's angels bind him, wrapping him in chains.

"Murderer," Remial whispers as Gabriel gets off of him. "You killed my son."

Gabriel hides his flinch and doesn't answer, taking to the sky again.

There is one that he cannot kill. There is a woman, heavily, obviously pregnant, and he can see that the child is of the Nephilim.

He made the mistake of looking into her eyes, and there are no other angels nearby to see him falter. His swordpoint drops to the ground inches from her belly, and he cannot raise it again to run her through.

She is terrified, she is confused, she is angry. He can see all of her emotions in her eyes, and he can only stare back, ashamed and guilty and hurt in return.

He can't raise his sword. She slaps him across the face and he turns his head, and he does not kill her.

"Hide," He tells her. "Go underground, go inside - hide!"

He doesn't watch her go, and instead takes to the skies again, praying that none of his angels finds her and brings her back to him. For then he will have no choice, and he will find it in himself to kill her, and he does not know if he could bear that.

The sun is hot overhead when they are finished, and the Host reassembles on that same location of red-brown soil and flat land.

The Grigori are bound, sealed into the Earth until the time of judgement, and the Nephilim are dead. (Gabriel does not speak of the woman he let live.) Raphael

returns with news of his success, and Uriel returns with his message passed on.

Gabriel looks at no one as they ascend back to Heaven, and he looks at no one as they enter the gates of Heaven, and he looks at no one as he leaves the assembled Host and flies for a quiet, private place in Heaven.

It is a room with a pool in it, a shallow depression in the floor that has a shelf for him to sit on in the water, and as he sinks into the water he causes the door to seal itself over and become a solid wall.

When he looks up he sees that the ceiling is mirrored, and oh, but he has to laugh.

Gabriel laughs and laughs as he thinks of a room just like this one from so long ago, and he laughs as he thinks of Lucifer, and he laughs until his throat is ragged and when he can laugh no more he cries.

And, while crying, he reaches a hand up and destroys the mirrors, making them crack and shatter and rain glass down upon his head and it is only when they hit the floor do they vanish from existence.

Gabriel curls forward and closes his eyes and sobs, and doesn't watch his tears disappear once they land in the water.

Heaven is subdued for the next few days, and Gabriel is not seen for a while, and not a single angel mentions his absence.

Uriel thinks about Gabriel, however. He watches Dobiel perform Gabriel's duties adequately, and he sees Dobiel speaking with Orphiel, and sometimes he overhears Dobiel discussing his duties with Orphiel, asking for advice and talking out any problems he is having.

Uriel doesn't say anything about it, however, and thinks of Gabriel, and thinks that this is something that Gabriel will want to know someday.

Uriel thinks about Gabriel when he sees Raphael destroy and remake one of the larger towers in a single hour, as an expression of helpless rage.

Uriel thinks about Gabriel when Michael spends long periods of time in seclusion with the Metatron and doesn't return from those sessions looking comforted.

Uriel is finally forced to put Gabriel out of his mind when Abdiel reminds him that he has yet to choose angels for the garrison that he is the join, and so Uriel spends the next few days not thinking about Gabriel at all, but studying other angels and trying to forget about Earth.

He has been asked to select six angels for his garrison, and so he take his list of potential angels and he chooses one at random and he spends a day assisting

that angel in their duties.

The first angel he spends time with is Arariel, the highest ranking angel on his list. She is a Cherubim, first class, and to Uriel's relief she has no objections to joining a garrison, and so the day he spends with her is pleasant and fascinating, for her primary duty is to classify demons, particularly the newest ones that the guards on the edges of Hell have been capturing and destroying.

She's constructed a large listing of each type of demon, and she's classified them according to their shape, and she has created images of each of the demons, and she keeps all of this information in a large book that she is constantly adding more to.

When he asks her about her other duties she refers him to her completed (unless something changes, and she will update it) work on the weaponry that angels use, and when he is allowed he reads it, and finds an entry on his own twin swords of fire.

"I managed to watch you spar with Gabriel several times," she explains. "They are impressive weapons, you know. Nearly on the level with Gabriel's own sword, but don't tell him I said that." She covers that with a pleasant laugh, and Uriel smiles to hear it.

There is only one oddity about her, and that he discovered when she told him that she enjoyed her only trip to Earth, and that next time she would prefer to spend enough time down there so that she could catalogue and list the creatures and plants and things that she could find down there.

Uriel isn't sure he entirely trusts this curiosity, but when he suggests a brief mock-battle to test if she could survive combat, she not only withstands his attacks, she survives them long enough to get in a few blows before he finally delivers what would have been a fatal hit.

"I'd survive long enough for backup to reach me," Arariel says with another laugh, and he cannot help but agree.

At the end of the day he tells her that she is likely going to be his final selection, and she tells him that she'd enjoy it.

The next week passes in much the same way, but with varying results on the angels he shadows, and he has selected only three of them for his final list when Gabriel returns from his self-imposed exile.

There's no fanfare, no sudden announcement that Gabriel came back, but Uriel sees a change in Heaven regardless, as with Gabriel returned and smiling again, a pleasant mood cannot help but spread.

Uriel can see a new purpose in Gabriel's cheeriness, however, and he wonders if Gabriel has come to a decision, and if so, then what decision?

"Hiya, Uriel," Gabriel says, cheerful enough to believe that it's a real emotion, and not something he forced upon himself before he drowned himself in that pool.

Uriel is at the ready, and Gabriel has to grin as he touches his blade to one of Uriel's as they've immediately fallen back into their routine of sparring until conversation happens.

Gabriel missed Uriel, when he was recovering, and he freely admits it after fending off a complex and well-executed attack from Uriel.

"You missed me?" Uriel repeats, attention drawn, expression confused.

"I did. I like these sessions of ours, and I was pretty lonely in there." Even as Gabriel speaks he can see Uriel forming a question, one that he probably doesn't want to ask. "Whatever you're thinking, say it." He says.

"I…if you were alone, then why did you stay in there?" Uriel asks, and Gabriel can see that he's expecting anger or some equally unpleasant reaction from Gabriel at the question.

Gabriel doesn't lash out at Uriel or rebuke him for the question however, as he invited it, and instead he gestures Uriel over to sit on their bench again, sheathing his sword.

Once he's seated he leans back with his hands behind his head and considers his answer.

"You could say that I didn't want to see anyone, Uriel. I don't think it would've been pretty if I'd been forced to talk to any of you while I was in there, as I wasn't in a good way." He's being mostly honest, mostly open to Uriel. He's surprised at himself for even trying it, but here he is, and he thinks that perhaps he should do this more often. Uriel's proven himself to be trustworthy, after all.

"You made your wishes clear, Gabriel." Uriel says quietly. "Dobiel took over your duties while you were away."

"And? How'd he do?" Gabriel's asking not because he wants to know the answer (it knows it already) but because he wants Uriel's opinion.

"He did well, Gabriel. I did notice that he consulted Orphiel on several issues, however, and that prevented some tangles. I would recommend having them work together in the future." Uriel understands what Gabriel is asking for, and he understands that he can give Gabriel this report in confidence.

Gabriel nods to himself, thinking. "Orphiel, huh? He's reliable, I've heard."

"What are you planning?" Uriel asks, and puts his hand over his mouth. He hadn't meant to ask that, but it had been so obvious that Gabriel was considering something. He doesn't know what, and he knows so little about the archangel's inner-workings that Gabriel is a constant surprise to him.

Then again, he doesn't understand any of the original archangels. Something about them is just so distant, and it's not caused by just their excess of power.

Gabriel is looking at Uriel, and he's pulled his hands down and into another clap when he answers.

"Let's just say that I'm thinking about Earth, Uriel." He smiles again, hiding his sudden worry away under amusement. Uriel will be fine, he thinks. Uriel's a smart angel, and he won't do anything stupid.

Gabriel, on the other hand...well. He chuckles to himself, and wonders when he'll be able to pull his plan together.

The fifth angel Uriel chooses for his garrison is unremarkable, and Uriel wouldn't have picked him if not for two reasons.

The first is his speed: Uriel has to call out to the angel during his patrol and ask him to slow down so that Uriel can keep up. Uriel sees the quiet surprise on the angel's face at his request, and he recognizes the expression. He's worn it before, specifically when he first discovered that Gabriel had not the mastery over fire that Uriel had despite his great power.

So the angel is swift on wing, and agile as well, and Uriel has never been so awed to see one of his brethren in flight before. It doesn't take long before Uriel is seeing the potential uses of such swiftness.

The second reason is Gabriel, and his sudden intrusion upon their patrol, and Uriel realizes with a guilty start that he forgot to inform Gabriel that he would not be coming for their daily sparring sessions today.

"No apologizing," Gabriel tells him once he tries to start. "Introduce me instead. Are you being looked at for the garrison?" He asks the other angel, who is quiet and nervous and who has not yet raised his head from the respectful bow.

"Gabriel, this is Castiel," Uriel tells Gabriel, and he gently nudges Castiel's shoulder. "He'll most likely join the garrison." He sees Gabriel's approving look and the growing interest, and he knows that he's made the right choice in his snap decision.

Castiel looks at Uriel, surprised, and Uriel is gratified to see that Castiel looks grateful.

"You're the fastest flier I've seen, Castiel. We could use that." Uriel tells him. But beyond that, he wouldn't have included Castiel except that Gabriel is here, and anyone Gabriel is interested in is worth knowing.

"Fastest flier?" Gabriel says, and he moves in close, forcing Castiel to meet his eyes. "I want to see this."

Uriel sees the surprise on Castiel's face, and the un-hidden nerves, and he is relieved when Gabriel grins at Castiel. Gabriel won't let Castiel retreat into nervousness, he's sure of that, and if Uriel's lucky Gabriel will draw more emotions out of Castiel.

(Uriel realizes how strange this is after seeing the nervousness on Castiel's face. Gabriel is one of the most highly ranked and most powerful angels in the Heavens, one of the three who have seen God's face, and Castiel is just a soldier, a plain angel, one of the lowest ranked angels in Heaven. There is nothing special about Castiel beyond his speed, and Uriel had forgotten how intimidating Gabriel had been to him at first.)

"I'm not certain that I would be faster than you," Castiel says quietly. "But I have yet to finish my patrol."

And that, that right there cements the deal. Uriel's having Castiel in the garrison come Hell or high water, as the nerves have been mixed with a quiet daring, and besides, Uriel knows what's coming next.

"I'll race you," Gabriel tells Castiel. "Where's your patrol end?"

"At the gates of Zebul, Gabriel," Castiel says, and to his surprise he sees Gabriel's wings hiding themselves until he has only a single pair manifested. Gabriel's wings are still vast and pure, and Castiel's wings, while large enough, aren't nearly as large or as purely white.

"I'm making this fair, so you'd better not go and let me win out of politeness." Gabriel threatens cheerfully, looking out over Heaven, mapping the course in his mind.

"Understood, sir," Castiel says and that earns him a sharp look.

"Call me Gabriel. I don't like being sirred, or my lorded, or any of those things. Not unless Michael or Raphael are around and insisting on it." Gabriel makes a face, and Castiel nods, uncertainly.

"Understood, Gabriel," He almost trips over the name, but doesn't.

Uriel looks between them and makes a soft noise for attention. "If neither of you mind, I'll go now? I know without trying that I wouldn't outpace either of you."

"Go on then!" Gabriel says with a laugh, and Uriel starts off, relieved with the turn

of events. Gabriel's not annoyed at him for missing their sparring, and Gabriel's interested in Castiel, which can only be good news for the angel.

Gabriel turns back to Castiel once Uriel's gone and grins. "We'll wait a moment before starting, okay?"

Castiel nods, and Gabriel can see that he's all nerves again without Uriel around, and that makes Gabriel scoot closer.

"Don't be so nervous, kid." Gabriel says, and it's the first time he's called a younger angel a kid, but after a moment's reflection it's true. They're younger and they don't know half the grief and heartbreak that he does.

Castiel looks at him, confused by this, and calms himself. It's an order, after all.

"I don't like it when family fights, Castiel," Gabriel tells him. "So you don't have to worry about me taking your head off." It occurs to him that he's never told anyone else this before. It's not exactly new about him, he knows that Michael and Raphael have known it ever since Michael first confronted Lucifer, but it's the first time he's ever said it out loud.

He doesn't tell Castiel this, and instead takes a moment to really remember the little angel. Someday he'll come and find Castiel and tell him more, he thinks. And if he can, he'll tell Castiel everything.

He can't put a finger on why he's chosen Castiel to be an audience for him in the future, but he likes Castiel already, and that must be good enough. It's enough for him to stop wondering and fly back, putting some space between them.

"Ready?" He asks, and at Castiel's nod he grins. "Go!"

He flies, and to his bemused surprise Castiel shoots past him, using a series of dives and climbing flaps to speed himself along as fast as he can.

Gabriel follows, putting in an effort, and even so Castiel maintains a large distance, and Gabriel laughs as he flies, glad to see that he can't win this, not without more wings and perhaps some other manifestations of power.

Not without cheating, in other words, and if nothing else Gabriel didn't cheat.

Uriel watches Castiel land, and half a minute later Gabriel lands next to them, grinning.

"Good find, Uriel!" He tells Uriel with a laugh, and he slaps Castiel's shoulder, pleased. "Castiel, you and Uriel are special. He's got a better control over his element, and you're faster than me. I'd hate to have to go up against you, especially if you were working together."

Gabriel trusts them not to become too prideful at his words, and he leans on Castiel for a moment, resting before he has to get going again.

"Thank you, Gabriel," Castiel says, and he's got a hint of pride and wonder in his voice, and Uriel echoes his words to Gabriel. He hadn't expected Castiel to actually beat Gabriel, but it had happened and he couldn't change the outcome now.

Gabriel leans up, crossing his arms, and all see the sudden set in his form that signals formality. Castiel and Uriel straighten unconsciously and listen.

"Make sure Castiel's assigned to your garrison, Uriel. And if you're skipping tomorrow's sparring, tell me beforehand. I'm certain that Dobiel would appreciate it, after all."

Uriel bows his head, and Castiel follows suit, and Gabriel brushes off the annoyance he feels at the sight.

"I will see the both of you later, then." Gabriel manifests the rest of his wings then and takes off.

Uriel chuckles quietly and watches him go. "Castiel, I too should go. Word will reach you when I've finalized my list."

He watches Castiel nod, he sees the curiosity in Castiel's eyes as he watches Gabriel fly away, and he wonders again at the effect the archangel has on them all.

Uriel came to Gabriel with the final listing before he brought it to Abdiel on a Thursday, and Gabriel didn't halt their sparring for the discussion.

There was the ring of swords as Uriel said the first name: "Arariel, she'll do well with us. Cherubim, has a great deal of information that could explain to us what we're fighting, if it comes down to that, and she can hold her own in a fight."

There was a loud hiss from Gabriel's sword as it met Uriel's, as he was trying a new method in controlling his fires, and the trace amounts of water reacted badly to Uriel's flames. Uriel drove back Gabriel's sword with a burst of strength, and spoke the second name as Gabriel struggled to remain in control: "Sachiel, one of the Cherubim, he's one of Guardian class. He and Arariel get along, and he'd keep her untouched in a battle situation."

Gabriel's flames flared suddenly as Gabriel's control slipped, and Uriel was forced back as they grew to consume his own blade. As he retreated he spoke the third name: "Cassiel, one of the Powers. He's strong, provided he's allowed to fight with his polearm and he has a strong knowledge of rituals."

Uriel charged once again as Gabriel dragged his fire back under control, and Gabriel blocked Uriel's swings with a newly concentrated force. As Uriel was forced to bring his second blade out of its attack and into holding Gabriel's blade

back he spoke the fourth name: "Tzaphiel, an archangel like myself. I've fought by his side before, and I would welcome his presence again."

Gabriel broke off his own attack and circled Uriel, altering his attack pattern into a series of fast jabs and cuts that Uriel barely managed to block, and even so Gabriel still opened his skin on his forearm. Gabriel stopped to let Uriel heal the cut, and as he did so Uriel spoke the fifth name: "Asasiel, angel. He has sharp eyes and a speed that almost rivals Castiel's. Between him and Castiel we would have two scouts and light warriors who would be useful."

Gabriel lowered his weapon, as did Uriel, and they sat on the bench as Uriel spoke of the last two names: "Castiel, of the same rank as Asasiel. You already know why I've chosen him. And then I complete the list. Well?"

"I have no complaints, Uriel," Gabriel said, leaning forward. "You've got enough heavy warriors to survive and win a fight, and you already know that I like the variety. Provided that you'll all get along as a garrison should..."

"We will, Gabriel," Uriel answered. "I'm sure of it."

"Then give that list to Abdiel and stop telling me about it!" Gabriel grinned at Uriel and stood, sheathing his sword. "I'd say we're done here."

Gabriel meets with Raphael the next morning, to deliver a message and to watch Raphael at work for a short while. The message is nothing special, simply a noting of which angels Gabriel is requesting from Raphael's service for Abdiel's garrisons, and then to simply spend some time with his younger brother.

"Raphael," Gabriel says, once he has delivered his message and gained a reply, "Mind if I follow you around for a while?"

"Why?" Raphael asks, plunging his hands into water to draw out the mass of tangled feathers and skin. It is an unshaped wing, one that had to be removed from an angel who was badly wounded on a skirmish at the border with a demon. He will heal the wing, repair it to its fully capacity and then he will reattach it to the angel. "You have no stomach for viewing injuries, Gabriel, and you know it."

They both know it: Gabriel dislikes the sight of injuries, and he bears it as best he can and avoids the injured when he can.

"I'm here to spend time with you, Raphael, and I'll put up with it for your sake, okay?" Gabriel watches as Raphael extends the wing, healing it with gentle touches.

"Then you may stay," Raphael says, and he turns his full attention to his work.

Gabriel also doesn't like being ignored, but he's used to it from Raphael, who has become serious and quiet these days. It's still easy to draw out that rage from

him, but the effort isn't worth it, and Gabriel knows what not to do or say in Raphael's presence.

Instead of interrupting Raphael's work further, Gabriel watches him at it instead, and he notes how Raphael smooths down wet feathers and splays his fingers over joints as he mends them.

Raphael restores color and life to the wing completely, and when he carries it to the nearby room, Gabriel follows and watches as Raphael finds the spot where the wing was severed on the angel and he watches as Raphael reattaches it. The angel, who resembles an animal more than a human, does not stir from his sleep until Raphael lays two fingers on his forward.

He awakes with a start, and Raphael watches as the wing stretches properly, and the angel thanks him with a bowed head before leaving to return to his post.

"He'll get injured again, you know," Gabriel comments. "That type always seems to fare badly, even if they do defeat their enemy."

"Their shape is wrong for fighting those shaped like us, Gabriel. I'll continue to heal them, and I never let them patrol alone. I can do little else for them."

"You don't adjust their placements, then?" Gabriel asks, both curious and somewhat disapproving. "I've reassigned mine to guard over the libraries and such. It keeps them safer and they're better at it anyways."

"Then your borders are not as well-secured as mine are, Gabriel, and you are weakening us for your misplaced concerns. If they are meant to survive, then they will." Raphael washes his hands again, and Gabriel resists the urge to freeze the water with a gesture.

"Don't try to tell me how to run things, Raphael. I know what I'm doing, and keeping their sort alive works better for all of us in the long run." His tone is sharp, and Raphael answers it with a glare. There is the anger that Gabriel had not meant to draw out, but had done so anyways.

"You remain convinced that if you rule over your court as you do currently that you will evade the realities of our situation, Gabriel. If they aren't meant to survive, they won't, even if you attempt to protect them. We will never know peace, not until the last of the Fallen have been slain. This…soft-hearted quality of yours will bring us ill tidings, and you know it." Raphael pauses in his speech and tilts his head, watching Gabriel, and he is coldly daring him with his next words. "I suggest that you destroy one of your subordinates, so that we will know that you are strong enough to sacrifice them for the greater good."

"No." Gabriel's answer is immediate, and tense.

Raphael changes topics, shrugging as he dries his hands. "I've heard that you train for battle daily with Uriel. Are you so lacking in confidence at your abilities?" They both know that they don't need to practice with their swords any longer, as

the reflexes have been formed and their reactions will not fade as time passes.

"It gives me a chance to try new skills, Raphael, and I think it's worth the time."

Raphael banishes the bed that the angel had been resting on, and faces Gabriel. "Then you should join your patrols and try those new skills in proper combat. It would compensate for the loss of the angels you have removed from them."

"I've proven myself in battle already, Raphael," Gabriel protests quietly. Raphael isn't asking him to take up the patrols, and he isn't protesting the sessions with Uriel. There's something more to what he's asking, and Gabriel thinks he knows what it is. "There's no need to test me, is there?"

"Next time Lucifer may not hesitate on his final blow, and he may kill Michael," Raphael replies, equally quiet, and Gabriel has confirmation of what Raphael was asking. "You could have reached them before I did. You could have defended Michael before I did. You didn't."

Gabriel has no answer for him. He never found an answer for himself that day, and he had counted himself lucky that no one else had noticed his hesitation. But Raphael had seen, and he knew...Gabriel has nothing to say to Raphael, and he doesn't meet Raphael's eyes.

Raphael gives him a cold look of disdain in lieu of an answer and leaves, and Gabriel does not follow.

With Gabriel returned to regular duty it wasn't long before the Metatron had an announcement for them all. Michael was summoned first, and it wasn't long before Gabriel and Raphael joined him before the empty throne that the Metatron stood next to at all times.

The announcement was short, but the moment Gabriel understood what it meant he once again had to practice restraint and avoid destroying the Metatron. (He knew that it was not to blame, but he understood all too well that the messenger often bore the brunt of the recipient's anger.)

It was simple, yet an effective measure that would restrict their movements on Earth: all angels who walked upon the Earth would be required to possess a vessel, as the veil that had previously protected the Earth from their presence would be sundered and torn. Additionally, to differentiate angels from demons, they would be required to gain the consent of any potential vessel, and that consent must be given freely.

There are other, less important dictates: to contain their strength, certain families with special bloodlines must be maintained through the years. A record must be kept current for all of the specially designated bloodlines as well.

Gabriel knows how the Earth would twist itself to exalt in glorifying any angel who

walked upon it, and he knows how humans would perish in viewing an angel's unchecked glory, much as many angels would perish upon sighting the face of God. He knows that they have been given a grace period to go without worrying about vessels or destroying humans unintentionally, but he cannot appreciate this sudden limitation.

The announcement was repeated to the assembled Host several hours later, and Gabriel despaired to hear it again, and to know that he had not misunderstood it.

He borrowed from Michael, and did not let his emotions show, and he borrowed from Lucifer and he smiled instead.

It was a quiet realization when it came. One minute before they had known nothing about the coming future, and the next minute they knew two names and how important those two humans would be.

Dean Winchester. Sam Winchester. The final vessels of Michael and Lucifer.

Not a single angel knew anything beyond that, but it was enough. They all knew that there would be an end, and that now they were living with a time-limit, even if they didn't know its exact duration.

The knowledge changed Gabriel's plans, and it wouldn't be long before he would be ready to depart Heaven once and for all.

Part III.